

THE NOBEL PRIZES

Methods of Their Distribution

Physics By WILLIAM T. STEAD Literature



IN December last the fourth distribution of the Nobel prizes took place. In the last four years sums aggregating roughly about three-quarters of a million dollars have been distributed to those who in the opinion of certain Scandinavian authorities have deserved best of their fellow-men in five distinct categories of human activity. Every year the interest accruing from the fortune which Nobel built up by manufacturing dynamite is divided into five equal portions.

One is allocated for Literature, a second for Peace, a third for Physics, a fourth for Medicine, and a fifth for Chemistry. Under each department an aggregate sum of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars has been given away as an award of merit. As a rule the prizes are given to only one person in each department. This rule, although strictly adhered to in the case of the prizes in Literature, Medicine and Chemistry, has been departed from repeatedly in the departments of Physics and Peace. The net result of the distribution is that, not reckoning Monsieur and Madame Curie as two persons, because in wedlock they are one, twenty prizes have been divided among twenty-five persons.

The first thing that strikes the eye in looking over the list of those who have obtained the distinction of a Nobel prize is that without exception they belong to the Old World. No American so far has obtained recognition for the services regarded by Nobel as worthy of the highest honor. In the list of the twenty-five mortals who have deserved best of their generation no American finds a place, neither does an Asiatic, African or Australian, no Italian, Belgian or Portuguese has found a place in this International Honors List.

The twenty-four prize winners come from the following nations: Germany five, Britain four, France five, Switzerland three, Holland two, Russia, Sweden, Norway, Spain and Denmark one each. If the twenty prizes are taken, the order is the same; but France has three, Switzerland one and a half, and Holland one; or, to state it roughly in dollars, the Germans have received two hundred thousand dollars, Britain one hundred and sixty thousand, France one hundred and twenty thousand, Switzerland sixty thousand, while seven other nations have received forty thousand dollars each.

The first question that probably will occur to the American reader is how it came to pass that American merit was so entirely overlooked. Can it be due to the prejudice of the adjudication? Of one thing there is no doubt. Among the judges who award the prizes in these International Olympic games there is not one American.

Nobel, the pious founder, was a Scandinavian, and although he left his fortune to all the world, he provided in his will that its distribution should be vested in Scandinavian hands. He wrote: "The prizes shall be awarded as follows: For physical science and chemistry, by the Swedish Academy of Sciences; for physiology or medical work, by the Caroline Institute at Stockholm; for literature, by the Stockholm Academy; and for peace work, by a committee of five members elected by the Norwegian Parliament. It is my express desire that, in awarding the prizes, no account shall be taken of nationality, in order that the prize may fall to the lot of the most deserving, whether he be Scandinavian or not."

As a matter of fact, only two out of the twenty prizes awarded up to date have gone to Scandinavians:

one, the literary prize in 1902, to Björnson, the famous Norwegian novelist; the other, the Chemical prize in 1903, to Arrhenius, the Swedish chemist of Stockholm.

The choice of these Scandinavian judges is limited to a certain extent by the nominations. It is true that most of the judges also may nominate candidates; but the judges are few, the nominators are many. "For the four prizes adjudicated upon at Stockholm nominations are made by the Swedish Academy; by the members, resident or foreign, of the Royal Academy of Sciences of Sweden; by the members of the (Swedish) Nobel committees; by the professors of the various universities in Sweden and Norway; or by professors in foreign universities who may be named therefor by the Swedish Academy; or finally by distinguished men to whom the Academy may think good to send an invitation to suggest a nomination." All these nominations, with the writings of the persons nominated, must be delivered to the Swedish Academy by February 1.

For the Peace prize, which is awarded by a committee sitting at Christiania, there is a still wider body of nominators. "Proposals for the prize for 1905 must be sent to the Comité Nobel Norvegien, Victoria Terrasse 3, Christiania, Norway, so as to reach the committee not later than April 1 next. Among the persons entitled to nominate competitors for prizes are the following: (1) Members of the Norwegian Nobel com-

mittee, (2) members of the legislative assemblies and Governments of the various States of the world, (3) members of the Commission de Bureau International Permanent de la Paix, (4) members and associates of the Institut de Droit International, and (5) university professors of law, of political science, of history and philosophy."

When the nominations arrive, they are handed to various sets of judges. "The selection from the nominations so made varies in the different cases. In Physics and Chemistry the selecting body is a pair of Nobel committees of five persons named by the Swedish Academy of Sciences. In Medicine the arrangement is similar, the medico-chirurgical or Royal Caroline Institute of Stockholm being the leading body among nominators; the selection resting again with a Nobel committee in medicine. In Literature the procedure is analogous, the Swedish Academy (founded in 1786 for the promotion of Swedish literature, language and poetry) taking the lead, but with the cooperation of the Academie Française and other literary academies of Europe."

The Norwegian Storting nominates the committee which adjudicates upon the Peace prize.

The first thing, therefore, for Americans to ascertain is whether, as was the case in the first year's competition as far as Britain was concerned, any Americans were nominated for any of the prizes. The Americans, like the British, have no academy like that which exists in Sweden, France and Spain. "In these countries in which an ancient academy of letters exists a committee sits to discuss the Nobel prizes and the best way in which votes could be given for candidates. In Germany, in Holland, in Italy, where there is no national academy of letters, the response of scholars in those countries to the appeal of the Nobel committee was instant and copious."

When inquiry was made as to the failure of the British to nominate anyone for the prizes of 1901, it was discovered that as the Swedes did not know any qualified Englishmen they satisfied themselves as best they could by sending broadcast to the secretaries of a heterogeneous lot of institutions in the United Kingdom and the Colonies copies of a printed circular. Several of these institutions were obsolete, one was dead, none had any vital connection with English literary life.

As nothing was heard from these circulars, it was presumed that they were consigned to the waste-paper basket that yawns ready to receive the innumerable circulars of foreign lotteries, which are sent every day through the post to the British householders. It would be interesting to ascertain whether a similar fate has overtaken a similar circular addressed to American institutions which in Stockholm have been supposed to supply the lack of an American Academy of Science or of Letters.

The English Royal Society as an Academy of Science is entitled to advise as to nominations, but all candidates must be nominated by persons, not by institutions. Nominations cannot be made en masse by academies, committees or other representative bodies. On this subject, the French Academy, which desired to send a cumulative vote, entered into a lengthy correspondence with the Swedish Academy, but failed to persuade the latter. Committees of academic bodies may discuss the question together, and may decide to concentrate their influence on a single candidate; but the result of these deliberations must reach the Swedish Academy in the form of recommendations from individual per-



Alfred Nobel